

4. Looking North: A Mid-South Perspective on the Great Strike

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Although they deplored the violence accompanying the Great Strike, the newspapers of the Mid-South were generally supportive of the rights of laborers and suspicious of the power of the federal government. Sympathetic to the plight of the workers, if not to the behavior of the rebellious crowds, the *Memphis Daily Appeal*, the *Nashville Daily American*, and the *Louisville Courier-Journal* used the strike and its associated violence to contrast the virtues of the South with the failings of northern industrial society, interpreting events through the lens of southern sectionalism. In much the same way, workers throughout the Mid-South also used the specter of the Great Strike for their own purposes, seeking where they could opportunities to advance their own economic interests.¹

Much has been written about the end of Reconstruction in the South, the redemption of southern state governments by conservative Democrats, and the abandonment of the cause of African Americans by the national Republican Party.² 1877 was a critical year for sectionalism in national politics, as northern Republicans traded an end to political interference in the South and a withdrawal of the last federal troops from Louisiana and South Carolina for control of the presidency and the national economy. The Compromise of 1877, brokered in February of that year, averted a national crisis and gave both northern white Republicans and southern white Democrats much of what they desired, but did little to change the general public's perceptions of sectional differences held since the end of the war. Many southern whites continued to resent the interference, both real and perceived, of northern

Republicans during Reconstruction, and took the opportunities presented by widespread violence across the North in July 1877 to proclaim the superiority and rightness of their own region. Most southern newspapers, and not a few politicians, found the issue particularly sweet as the strike focused attention on the relationship between labor and capital, an area in which southerners felt they had suffered an unfair number of indignities since before the war.³ In many ways, the Great Strike was tailor-made for use by the southern press in its rhetorical campaign highlighting the injustice and abuse inflicted by the national government and its use of troops to enforce its will against an honorable people, as well as the basic rightness of the South's labor relations and the oppressive labor conditions existing in the North. But it could only serve that propaganda function well if southern workers would not join the strike, a prospect that was not as assured as many newspaper pundits initially believed.

Although southern workers did not participate in the Great Strike to the same extent as their northeastern counterparts, they did their best to capitalize on the opportunities it offered.⁴ In the Mid-South cities of Memphis, Nashville, and Louisville, railroad workers, following the lead of railroad workers in Baltimore, Pittsburgh, and elsewhere, threatened to strike unless their wages were restored to their former levels. In general, these workers were successful, and only in Nashville, where the workers on one line were unsuccessful in achieving their demands, did the railroad workers actually participate in the strike. Other workers in the three cities also took advantage of the turmoil presented by the national strike—and the fear it generated—to press their own demands for higher wages or better working conditions. Thus, much of the labor peace that prevailed among southern workers in July 1877, at least in the Mid-South, did so not because southern workers were content with their lot but because most would-be strikers' demands were met without needing to resort to an actual strike.

Although in a region acutely hostile to unions, in 1877 southern workers had a long history of using strikes in an attempt to achieve higher pay and better working conditions.⁵ Workers in the South, both black and white, sought to improve their lives by developing community-building organizations and engaging in various protest actions in the workplace and the community.⁶ In 1871 Louisville blacks protested successfully against segregation of streetcars, and black dock workers in New Orleans struck, without a union, successfully for higher wages in 1865 and 1867.⁷ Complicated by issues of race, the relationship between labor and capital was frequently a contested one. Southern workers were never the contented and accommodating labor force the newspapers claimed, as their actions in Memphis, Nashville, and Louisville in July 1877 demonstrate well.

The Great Strike in the Mid-South

In line with its sectional perspective, when news of the Great Strike reached Memphis, the editors of the *Daily Appeal* presented the strike in terms of a rebellion pitting labor against capital.⁸ Expressing sympathy with the workers, the *Appeal* led with headlines suggesting workers could choose “Starvation Wages and Hard Work or Co-operative Opposition.”⁹ The headline further indicated the *Appeal*’s sympathy for the strikers by proclaiming that “In Presence of the Troops of the United States the Unfortunate Working Men Succumb to the Capitalists.” With headlines like these, a reader might mistakenly assume the *Memphis Daily Appeal* was a radical paper published by a workingmen’s press and not the typically conservative southern Democratic newspaper that it was.¹⁰ Even as the strike became more general and spread throughout the northern states, the *Appeal* remained unabashedly sympathetic to the strikers. Pronouncing in bold, large block letters “Starving Strikers!” the *Appeal* continued to lead with headlines such as “Labor Confronting Capital, Impelled by Desperation-‘Give us Bread,’ is the Cry which Goes Up in Answer to the Soldiers’ Appeal.”¹¹

But the *Appeal*’s stance had as much to do with the fact that the strike portrayed a negative aspect of the urban industrial society of the North as it did with any evident sympathy for the plight of American workers. It seems likely that if the strike were to come closer to home, the imagery used to portray the participants would be dramatically changed.¹² But with the strike initially confined to the North, the *Appeal* saw an opportunity to call attention to the shortcomings of northern society, recently victorious in the Civil War and a constant irritant during Reconstruction. In its coverage of July 20, just its second day of reporting on the strike, the *Appeal* gleefully noted that “In the Name of Law and Order the White Slaves of the North are Compelled to Yield to their Masters—No Emancipation for Them.”¹³ The use of this kind of rhetoric, complete with references to “The Enslaved Workingmen,” visibly cast the labor conflict in sectional terms its readers could understand.¹⁴

The *Appeal*’s editorial on the twenty-fourth presented the dilemma faced by the strikers. Given the economic downturn, work was not always available and workers might only work half or one-quarter time. This did not mean that the worker stayed home, however. A worker would make a run from Baltimore to Martinsburg but be kept there three or four days before being able to work a run back. The Baltimore-Martinsburg run paid two days’ wages, even though workers would have to pay their own room and board in Martinsburg waiting for a return run. One worker complained he had only worked five days in the previous month, and that “nearly half of the seventeen days of July he had spent at Wheeling, waiting for his turn.”¹⁵ The

reduced pay, minus the cost of room and board away from home, would leave little left for support of families. This situation repeated itself up and down the line. The imposed pay cut in July only made a bad situation worse.¹⁶

Not willing to cast this economic injustice purely in terms of labor versus capital, the *Appeal* tried to place the situation in its sectional context. "What man at the south, who reads this and recalls the vindictiveness with which our planters were pursued before and since the war on the labor question, but will admit that the curses of our northern brethren have gone home to roost." After discussing the wage rates of the railroad workers, the *Appeal* continued its sectional analysis: "compare these prices with what is paid to the negro plantation laborers, and it will be seen that slavery is now a northern institution." Disingenuously, the *Appeal* remarked that "we care not to gloat over the misfortunes of those who fattened upon our misfortunes, and who have held us up to the gaze of a too credulous world as examples of all that was vile and base."¹⁷ The North may have won the war, the *Appeal* seems to remind its readers, but the South remains the superior civilization. We do not want to gloat, the editors say, but we will:

Yet we cannot keep back the feeling of exultation which the dread occasion gives rise to, that here in the vilified south peace reigns supreme under the direction of governments of the people, that the poor, ignorant negro finds employment at a rate of wages that shames the pittance which has made madmen of the strikers of Pittsburg and Baltimore. We congratulate ourselves that, though feeling the pinching necessities of these times, no attempt has been made by our planters to reduce the wages of the negro laborers, and that no attempt has been made to force the white laborer down to starvation rates.¹⁸

To the editors of the *Appeal*, the Great Strike, perceived as a conflict between labor and capital in the urban North, provided strong evidence of the virtue of the South.

The editors of the *Nashville Daily American* similarly cast the Great Strike in sectional terms, although they tended to focus more on the issue of states' rights in the face of growing national power. After the first few days of reporting on the strike, but before realizing there would be any local manifestations of it, the *Daily American* noted under the headline "Federal Interference in Local Troubles" that "One of the most dangerous signs of our time is the readiness to call for military aid from the Federal Government."¹⁹ Casting responsibility for the strike on the corruption and extravagance of the Republican Party, the *Daily American* called for "a complete and thorough change of system . . . untrammelled by corrupt politics, false financial policies, and a radically wrong economic system."²⁰ As long as the strikers remained in the

North, the strike could usefully provide ammunition in an ongoing partisan, sectional fight. Despite what might have been going on in boardrooms and in the upper echelons of Democratic and Republican Party organizations that would ultimately give rise to a new national economic and political order, viewing current events through the lens of sectionalism was still a powerful way to achieve high rates of newspaper sales in the South.²¹

Like their counterparts in Memphis, the editors of the *Daily American* repeatedly used the strike to condemn the northern intervention in southern affairs following the Civil War, pushing for an acknowledged end to Reconstruction in the South.²² The strike, the *Daily American* argued, "will compel those busy people who are always so capable of taking care of their own business and that of their neighbors, to spend more thought upon their own affairs." Acknowledging that there was already "a growing disposition to leave Southern affairs to Southern people," the *Daily American* argued that "the imminent danger at home is likely to compel, not only the lately-grown wise, but also all others, the implacables and mischief-makers and Bourbons to attend strictly to their own business." With perhaps more insight than they realized, the *Daily American* proclaimed, "This sounds the death knell of Radicalism and all memory of the past and its sectional trouble."²³

Not surprisingly, the *Louisville Courier-Journal* shared the perspective that the strike was emblematic of northern problems that did not exist in the Mid-South. While acknowledging that the strike owed to "universal conditions" affecting workers, the *Courier-Journal* proudly proclaimed that, "these conditions do not exist in Louisville or in Kentucky." The editors assured their readers that "our work people . . . are, as a rule, measurably prosperous and happy," a conclusion reached, no doubt, without actually speaking to any of the workers.²⁴ In telling their tale of northern violence and the Great Strike, the *Courier-Journal* happily noted that "the 'law-abiding North' presents a somewhat mixed aspect at the present moment."²⁵

In Memphis, the *Appeal's* sympathy for the strikers was aided by the confidence the editors had that the labor troubles would be confined to the North and would not spread southward to Memphis, a confidence that was not entirely well founded. A week into the strike, the *Appeal* wrote that although it was the major topic of discussion in the city, "the strike has not reached Memphis, and no fears are entertained that it will extend this far."²⁶ In recounting for its readers the situation of the five railroads coming into Memphis, the *Appeal* claimed that "Nothing whatever justifies the belief that there will be a strike on any of the local roads named above." The Mississippi & Tennessee Road was, according to the *Appeal*, "in good working order, all the employes being satisfied with what they are now receiving in the way

of wages." Puffed up with pride, the *Appeal* commented on "the cheerful disposition and feelings of the employes," noting that "anything like a strike is impossible." The paper pronounced the Memphis & Little Rock Railroad "also in a safe condition, and nothing in the nature of a strike is anticipated." A third railroad, the Memphis & Paducah, was only thirty miles long and employed few men, making it "almost too short to be affected by any strike." The *Appeal* happily proclaimed the line "safe from the effects of a railroad strike."²⁷

Labor peace on these three lines was helped by the fact that the Mississippi & Tennessee Road and the Memphis & Little Rock Railroad had not reduced the wages of their employees, nor had they given any indication that they would do so.²⁸ Given the smallness of the Memphis & Paducah operation, it is unlikely that they had reduced wages yet either, but were waiting to follow the lead of the other lines into the city. The situation on the other two major railroads coming into the city, though, was less certain.

As the national strike progressed, employees of the Louisville & Nashville & Great Southern Railroad received decidedly mixed news about what would happen to their wage rates. In Memphis, the railroad workers heard on Monday, July 23, that the president of the company, E. D. Standiford, announced that "no reduction of wages or salaries would be made on the Louisville and Nashville and Great Southern railroad."²⁹ This good news was attributed to the effect of the national strike, and the *Appeal* noted that "it was rumored yesterday that this road contemplated a reduction of wages the first of August, and the belief obtains that such determination was changed because of the influence of the strike and its probable effect upon this company."³⁰ According to the *Appeal*, workers held an informal meeting in the roundhouse of the Louisville & Nashville & Great Southern Railroad on Monday night (the 23rd), and "the situation was discussed, but no definite action was had. The employes are doubtless satisfied, inasmuch as assurances have been made that the wages and salaries of employes would not be reduced, but restored to the sums which prevailed in June."³¹

This victory without a fight and the goodwill the company earned thereby, however, was cast into doubt by reports in Memphis indicating that the *Nashville Daily American* had earlier reported that an order had been "received from Louisville, Friday night, announcing that on the first of next month the wages of all the employes on the Louisville and Nashville and Great Southern road, from superintendents on down, would be reduced ten percent." "The order," the *American* noted, "was countermanded, however, shortly after it was bulletined, yesterday [Saturday] morning."³² Newspapers were the chief means by which the public received its information, and the

rapid transmission of news via telegraph, and railroad delivery of newspapers, permitted neighboring cities and towns to get up-to-the-minute reports, and if needed, to act on them.³³ Having heard Monday there would be no reduction in wages, then hearing Tuesday that such an order had, in fact, been issued and then countermanded the previous Saturday, created a great deal of excitement among the employees. The *Appeal* reported Tuesday that "The opinion prevails that this company will execute the intention of reducing wages the first of August, or as soon thereafter as the threatening aspect of the present strike is over."³⁴ The paper further noted that "it was rumored that there is somewhat of a discontent among the employes . . . because of the late changes and threatened ten per cent reduction of wages," concluding that "should the company attempt to execute the ten-per-cent reduction, there may be no little trouble and a determined opposition on the part of its employes." Despite these concerns, the *Appeal* reported that the officers of the company remained "confident that there cannot be a strike on this line, as all the employes are contented and satisfied." Fear that a possible strike on the Louisville & Cincinnati Short-Line, which had received a notice of reduction in pay, would spill over into the operations of the Louisville & Nashville dissolved when that order was rescinded, making company officials even more confident in their pronouncements of labor peace in Memphis.³⁵

But things were not as peaceful in Memphis as they might have seemed on the surface. The workers on the Memphis & Charleston Railroad, who had already endured a pay cut in March, saw an opportunity in the Great Strike to redress their grievances. Although the vice president and general manager, Charles M. M'Ghee, was in Memphis and expressed "no fear of a strike" on the twenty-fourth, the workers of the Memphis & Charleston had met secretly the night before to discuss their situation.³⁶ Although in reporting on that meeting, the *Appeal* claimed that "the employes of the road are reticent upon the subject, and refuse to impart any information respecting the meeting," the editors remained confident and proclaimed on the twenty-fifth that "a strike is not likely to occur on this road."³⁷

Despite the confidence of the *Appeal's* editors, however, the workers of the Memphis & Charleston Railroad met that very afternoon to pass resolutions demanding that their pay be raised to the level of the other railroads serving Memphis. Meeting in the roundhouse late in the afternoon on Wednesday the twenty-fifth, about 170 workers of the Memphis & Charleston Railroad appointed a committee to meet with the general manager of the railroad and "request him to advance the wages of the employes, so that they would be paid the same wages as are now paid the employes of the Mississippi and Tennessee and Memphis and Little Rock railroads." Choosing to peg their

wages to these lines, instead of to the recently reduced then restored wages of the Louisville & Nashville & Great Southern, was probably just common sense, but could also have been related to the workers' general feelings of unease about the actual status of their future wages. Rumors abounded that the Louisville & Nashville & Great Southern workers were going to demand a written statement from the president of the line pledging himself "to abide by the terms of the contract," although the *Appeal* did its best to suggest those rumors were false.³⁸ The threat to public order, however, was real enough that the governor issued an order on the twenty-fifth authorizing Robert Duncan to take command of the local militia "in case of disturbance." Duncan assured the governor, writing "I do *not* [emphasis in original] anticipate any trouble, but should there be, will act promptly as you direct."³⁹

With the hope of avoiding a strike in Memphis truly threatened by action on the Memphis & Charleston, the editors of the *Appeal* were quick to caution Memphis workers. Reacting to the threats expressed by "a few idle and inconsiderate persons, having no connection whatever with the working men," the *Appeal*, proclaiming itself the "true and tried friend of the laboring and working classes," warned that "the people of Memphis will not for a moment tolerate anything like riot or violence, and that any attempt at either will be promptly met and severely punished."⁴⁰ The newspaper gave clear notice that the image of labor presented by the *Appeal* could and would change on a moment's notice if the situation warranted it. The *Appeal* further noted the sectional image of peaceful labor relations that needed to be maintained if the South was to consolidate the victories achieved in the Compromise of 1877, remarking that "[w]e have hitherto prided ourselves on our capacity for self-government, and we mean to continue on that line at any sacrifice. . . . Property, which represents industry, should be only less sacred than life, both will be protected in Memphis, cost what it may."⁴¹ Hope for a peaceful resolution, however, remained high, and the *Appeal* repeatedly remarked that the workers' demands were "so reasonable and couched in such language as to make it a subject for quick consideration," and clearly suggested that the request to be paid at the same rate as the other Memphis railroads was "neither unreasonable nor unnatural."⁴²

The feared strike, and the stain upon southern honor it would entail, never came to pass. Vice President M'Ghee, general manager of the Memphis & Charleston, "consented to restore the wages as they existed previous to the reduction in March, the same to take effect August 1." The *Appeal* also reported that "he also agreed to advance the rates of all employes by the fifteenth of August, so as to make them equal to the wages paid by the Mississippi and Tennessee railroad."⁴³ The *Appeal* noted in its editorial that, by acceding to

the demands of the workers, M'Ghee avoided "not only a strike on his own, but probably on all the other roads centering in Memphis."⁴⁴ By the weekend, the *Appeal* was able to proclaim "Peace Here" in its headlines: "All Possibility or Probability of a Strike Passed Away—Our Workingmen Content and Happy."⁴⁵

Although labor peace among railroad workers held in Memphis during the Great Strike, it was not because management and labor "understood" each other, or because labor was truly "content and happy," but because they were successful in using the strike as it occurred elsewhere to their own advantage. The workers on the Louisville & Nashville & Great Southern Railroad benefited from action taken by others which led to their pay cut being rescinded even before it was issued to them. The workers on the Memphis & Charleston used the specter of the national strike to not only restore the wage cuts they had endured earlier in the Spring, but also to, in essence, give themselves a raise. In celebrating a successful resolution of any differences between the railroads in Memphis and their workers, the *Appeal* repeated its observations as to the sectional nature of the strike. "In common with our brethren of the southern press, we have many times the past two weeks congratulated our readers upon the fact that while the north was a prey to lawlessness more violent and disastrous than has ever befallen any people in the same time, the south was free from excitement and her people were engaged in attention to their business, intent on nothing so much as making good crops and increasing the wealth of our section by permanent and valuable improvements."⁴⁶ In Memphis, the events in July concluded in a classic win-win scenario: newspaper editors could claim the absence of a strike as evidence of a contented and happy workforce, while workers proved once again that the realistic threat of a strike could bring about significant improvements in wages.

Although the editors of the Nashville *Daily American* shared the *Appeal's* sectional perspective regarding the status of labor, their city did not share Memphis' good fortune in avoiding a local outbreak of the railroad strike. Prospects for averting the strike initially seemed favorable, particularly after the Louisville & Nashville & Great Southern road rescinded its 10 percent pay cut on the twenty-first.⁴⁷ The lines coming into the city from Louisville were of particular concern, and as prospects for labor peace in that city increased, confidence in Nashville followed. Activity on the part of workers on the Louisville & Cincinnati Short-Line Railroad had led to fears that a strike would spill over into Nashville, and perhaps even Memphis. According to the *Daily American*, on Sunday the twenty-second, a committee of railroad men petitioned the court in Louisville to rescind "the order for a reduc-

tion of wages, to take effect Aug. 1." The men petitioned the court directly, through the railroad's lawyers, because the line was in receivership and the receiver, McLeod, was out of the city and could not be reached by telegraph. Judge Bruce complied with the request, rescinding the order reducing wages, thereby adding a second Louisville railroad to the ranks of roads restoring wages to their previous levels without the need for a strike.⁴⁸

Despite the confidence that prevailed in both Louisville and Nashville, things would not remain calm for long. On Tuesday the twenty-fourth, the *Daily American* noted "a feverish anxiety for news concerning the railroad troubles" and reported not only on what it called unfounded rumors that "the men on the Southeastern road had resolved upon a strike," but that several workingmen's meetings and gatherings had taken place. Apparently, a meeting had been called Monday night at the courthouse to discuss railroad wages, but was subsequently postponed. Nonetheless, about two hundred people showed up to see what would happen, only about one-quarter of them reportedly from the railroad. That same night, however, around forty men from the Decatur Division of the Louisville & Nashville & Great Southern Railroad, who had seen their wages reduced 10 percent on June 1, held a meeting "in the hall above Haley's drug store," passed resolutions calling for a reinstatement of their wages to the level prior to the June 1 reduction, and "then marched down to the Public Square."⁴⁹ Clearly, not all workers in Nashville were satisfied with the way things were.

Up the road in Louisville, things were rapidly getting worse. Although the railroadmen on the Louisville & Nashville & Great Southern Railroad had their wages restored to their June levels, the specter of the Great Strike allowed other workers to voice their grievances. The *Daily American* reported that in Louisville on Tuesday, "a gang of negro sewer-men stopped work, and with picks, shovels, etc, on their shoulders, marched through the streets, stopping all other laborers. Before night there were seven hundred, including some whites."⁵⁰ In the midst of the disorder, at around 3 P.M., the superintendent of the Clarksville Division of the Louisville & Nashville, headquartered in Louisville, sent a dispatch to Superintendent Geddes in Nashville informing him that the president of the company had issued an order restoring wages to their earlier levels.⁵¹

Although the men of the Decatur depot greeted the news with applause and were reported as "saying they felt like working harder than ever and would increase their efforts in behalf of the company, which should lose nothing by its prompt concession," there were still other issues to resolve. Emboldened by their success, and capitalizing on the generalized fear created by the national strike, that evening the men met to sign a resolution

"requesting the management of the road to send around the pay car a little earlier than heretofore, so that the company shall not be in arrears with them more than one month at a time."⁵² It seems clear that the events associated with the Great Strike gave workers in Nashville, Louisville, and elsewhere opportunities to advance their own interests in ways both small and large, whether they worked for the railroads or not.

In the Mid-South as elsewhere, the events associated with the Great Strike grew well beyond the boundaries of a labor management dispute.⁵³ In Nashville, on the evening the Decatur Division's wages were restored to their pre-June levels, a large crowd gathered on the public square. The *Daily American* reported that between three hundred and four hundred people "were on the ground waiting for something to turn up."⁵⁴ When it became clear that a meeting had not actually been called by the railroadmen, and that nothing was going on inside the courthouse, the crowd became boisterous and decided to make its own fun. Calling forward a local drunk, Jeems Cameron, and helping him sit up on the gate post, the crowd called out, "Do you want a drink, Jeems?" "No, sir; I've got a bottle in my pocket." The *Daily American* reported that after some "facetious remarks" by Cameron, "which were enjoyed immensely by the crowd, he slid down off the post and engaged in the rush of the crowd through the dark hallway toward the third story of the Court house." The paper noted that "no lights had been provided and the noise and confusion were indescribable." Describing the scene further, the *Daily American* reported:

At last some one appeared with candles, and calls were made upon various persons to occupy the chair, into which Charles Heuser was finally forced. He said he was no railroad man, but a beer agent [Applause] After stating he sympathized with the railroad men, he remarked if they wished to ask a railroad for a favor they should not have a mob of loafers, idlers and thieves with them to destroy property. Every good citizen ought to be opposed to such outrages.

Marcus B. Toney, having been called upon, said that if a resolution was adopted it should set forth that the South did not countenance any such violence as that displayed north of the Ohio river. The South strongly condemned these mobs. [Applause.]

Morris Moran thought that if any railroad man had a grievance he could have it righted by applying to the proper authority.

Some man then yelled "Let's all go home!"—and they went.⁵⁵

Having stormed the courthouse for their own purpose, and finding none, the crowd dispersed without any reported violence or further disturbance.⁵⁶ The meeting, as the *Memphis Appeal* suggested, "had no head nor tail," but was "a promiscuous assemblage" that "shouted and made fun until their lungs had

been well nigh exhausted."⁵ Although the meeting ultimately did not result in any specific outcome directly related to advancing workers' interests, the potential for mob violence would not have gone unnoticed by the citizens of Nashville, particularly after the reports from Louisville started coming in.

The crowds that gathered in Louisville that night were not as playful as the one in Nashville turned out to be.⁵⁸ Beginning around 10 A.M., and then continuing through the afternoon, striking sewer workers had gone from one sewer construction site in the city to another, eventually reaching the new waterworks being constructed on the edge of the city, forcing or persuading the workers to strike for higher wages. At noon all the laborers working on installing new gutters throughout the city also went on strike. The *Courier-Journal* described a gathering crowd of around "200 persons" with "very few white men," and that "the negroes were mostly half dressed, dirty looking persons, evidently belonging to the worst class of colored men, and were armed with picks, shovels, and some with pieces of wood and sticks." When the strikers passed by the Knickerbocker saloon, a fight broke out, and when one of the young men involved in the fight fled the scene, police gave chase. According to the *Courier-Journal*, the pursuit "created excitement, and in less than five minutes probably a thousand persons, men and boys, white and black, were congregating around." The crowd did not interfere with the policemen, who successfully arrested Thomas Higgins on charges of assault and battery. When asked why he had not earlier tried "dispersing the negro mob before it commenced," the police chief, Col. Isaac Edwards, said "he feared that any effort of his to disperse them might have caused trouble and brought on a riot." Luckily, by late afternoon the crowd "dispersed of its own accord." Recognizing the threat to the city, however, a number of Louisville's notable citizens organized as a special militia, and the mayor called for reinforcements from the armory in Frankfort.⁵⁹

That night, in a courthouse scene remarkably similar to the one that had occurred at the same time in Nashville, "people came together in response to no special call, but by some mutual consent or other. There was no head man to the affair, and consequently nobody seemed to know the exact reason for the assemblage." The *Courier-Journal* described a crowd of more than two thousand, but observed that there "was no indication of anything contemplated of a serious nature." Instead, the editors noted that a positive good humor seemed to prevail. Similar to events in Nashville, "yelling and cat calls were indulged in, and different men were called upon to speak, but no one seemed disposed to gratify the crowd."⁶⁰ Eventually, the crowd called for the mayor to speak, and he came over from his office in city hall. Proclaiming himself the "friend of the workmen," the mayor reiterated the sentiments

he had expressed earlier in a printed proclamation to the workingmen of Louisville calling for order and moderation in pressing their claims. The mayor closed his remarks "by asking the crowd to disperse and retire quietly to their respective homes." But even before he had finished speaking, the crowd began shouting and the mayor "left amid an uproar."⁶ In Nashville, the *Daily American* put a different spin on the event, claiming that Louisville officials had called a meeting that evening to attempt "to pacify the working men," but everyone agreed the meeting was a failure, and the *Daily American* wrote that when the mayor tried to speak, he was "hooted down."⁶²

At this point events in Louisville took a dramatically different turn than in Nashville. Instead of reaffirming the cause of order and moderation and closing with a call of "let's go home," as happened in Nashville, the speakers in the Louisville crowd took a more "inflammatory tone" and called for a march of protest. The *Courier Journal* estimated that about five or six hundred people followed the leaders into the street and responded to the call, "Let's go to the Nashville depot."⁶ Although the Louisville & Nashville & Great Southern Railroad had earlier rescinded its pay cut for mechanics and engineers, it refused to advance the wages of its lowest paid laborers.⁶³ The crowd, described as consisting of mostly "boys and negroes," quickly became violent, throwing stones through the windows of the Home sewing-machine company, breaking out street lamps, and smashing all the windows in the depot. When the police arrived, the crowd rushed up Broadway and stoned two policemen who had fired their pistols at the crowd, and "the officers escaped with their lives by beating a rapid retreat." The crowd, although dwindling down to around one hundred, continued down the street, smashing windows and looting stores. The mob forced the doors at a local saloon, demanded liquor, and freely raided the confectionary, grocery, and drug stores along the route. On their way to the Short Line depot, the rioters stoned all the stores and residences they passed. After turning onto Third Avenue, the mob attacked the mayor's house, breaking several of the windows, and continued up the street, almost reaching Green Street, when they realized they had bypassed the residence of Dr. Standiford, president of the Louisville & Nashville & Great Southern Railroad. The *Courier-Journal* reported that "as soon as this became known, the mob turned in its tracks, and with stones assailed the house, and the stores and residences within throwing range. Every window in the house of Dr. Standiford was demolished and the furniture seriously damaged." The mob continued in this fashion, with "stones whizzing into all the residences on both sides of the street," until it reached the Short-Line depot, where about fifty policemen had formed a line across the street to protect the building. When someone in the crowd shouted out to "attack

the police" so they could torch the depot, the officers fired on the crowd. The *Courier-Journal* initially reported that the police fired blank cartridges and that no one was hurt.⁶⁷ In Nashville, the *Daily American* reported that police fired over the heads of the rioters.⁶⁸ In a separate article written in the morning, the *Courier Journal* confirmed that "there were several persons shot by the police at the Short Line depot" and that "the shots fired by the police . . . were not blank cartridges." "In any event, the shots scattered the mob, and the police let them go."⁶⁸

Back at the Louisville & Nashville depot, when police tried to arrest two whites and an African American they believed to be among the leaders of the mob, they found they had to fight their way through the angry crowd. The newspaper reported they were successful but were "compelled to beat up the prisoners somewhat on account of their resistance."⁶⁹ Shortly after midnight, the weapons from the armory in Frankfort arrived and several hundred more citizens were armed. Issuing a proclamation around midnight, the mayor noted, "With pleasure I announce that I now have fully armed and equipped a sufficient force to command and compel quiet and a due observance of the law." Commanding "all persons for the present not to assemble in crowds on the streets or in public places," he forcefully declared that "the spirit of law and order pervades the people of Louisville, and they are determined that mobocracy shall not obtain or rule in this city."⁷⁰ There were no further reports of mob violence that night, although someone tried and failed to burn down the building housing the main office of the Louisville & Nashville Railroad.⁷¹

The next day saw a semblance of order return to the streets of Louisville, accompanied by increased demands from the city's workers. According to press reports, more than 1,600 armed citizens and police patrolled the city, including a number on horseback.⁷² To coordinate the spontaneous militia that had formed in response to Tuesday night's mob, in the early morning hours of Wednesday the twenty-fifth, Mayor Jacob directed the former police chief, Basil W. Duke, to organize and take command of "a volunteer corps to be used as Special Police."⁷³ Duke reported that the force "under arms and on duty during the nights of the 25th and 26th, was little less than twenty five hundred men." The commander of city forces, as Duke was called, expressed confidence that had enough arms been available and the need greater, he could easily have recruited five thousand men.⁷⁴ The *Courier Journal* noted that morning that at "half-past 8 o'clock, the City Hall was alive with soldiers," and by nine A.M., Duke had partially distributed the arms from Frankfort and sent his three strongest companies out to patrol the principal streets of the city. The mayor issued a proclamation at ten o'clock that morning closing

until further notice all places where liquor was sold, with loss of license and a \$10 penalty for any violations, and the police began the task of arresting the known leaders of the mob.⁷⁶

The armed and mounted city forces were an effective counterweight to the demonstrations of the city's workers. Duke reported that on Wednesday, between seven and eight hundred men "were parading various parts of the city in gangs of from twenty to one hundred and fifty creating much disturbance and more apprehension among peaceable and orderly people." Duke observed that "they were visiting the various establishments where large numbers of hands are employed, inviting, and in some instances forcing the operatives to quit work." The city forces were able to effectively deal with the crowds, and Duke noted that "this rabble was readily dispersed, in most cases the gangs dissolved upon learning of the approach of the troops. Many of them were arrested and lodged in jail; but as they in no instance attempted resistance, none of them were shot or in any way injured."⁷⁷ By bringing overwhelming force to bear against the demonstrating workers, order was restored to the streets. By Wednesday night the worst of the violence seemed to be over. By Thursday morning the *Courier-Journal* could claim that "the city of Louisville is as completely possessed by her citizen soldiery at this moment as ever a fortress was possessed by a triumphant army."⁷⁸ By Friday morning Joshua F. Speed, noted attorney and Republican leader in Louisville, was confident enough in the restoration of order to write to Norvin Green that it was now "as quiet as a Sabbath—the danger of a mob is over."⁷⁹

But the mob action, and the sewer workers' strike that preceded it, had set in motion a series of strikes and job actions throughout the city. Railroad workers' involvement in the strikes was relatively short lived. The mechanics on the Louisville & Nashville Railroad had gone on strike in support of the line's unskilled laborers, who were demanding an increase in their wages. Although President Standiford had agreed to roll back the wage cuts for the engineers and other skilled workers on the line, he steadfastly refused to advance the pay of those laborers whose wages were so low they were not included in the initial reduction.⁸⁰ After a lengthy discussion in which Standiford remained firm, the mechanics "went away satisfied" and returned that night "enthusiastically performing guard duty for the protection of the company's property."⁸¹ In his report to shareholders at the end of the year, President Standiford praised the line's workers, noting that although "attempts to destroy your property were incited by the very worst elements of society, the idler and the restless labor agitator, who will not work under any consideration; but I am proud to say that our employes held to wiser counsel, and, when the crisis came, flew to our assistance, and, with arms in their hands,

were day and night most vigilant in the protection of your property."⁸² The support of the railroad workers, combined with large detachments of Duke's city forces that "picketed and guarded very closely" both the Short Line and Louisville & Nashville depots, kept the destruction of railroad property in Louisville at a minimum.⁸³

But the Great Strike in Louisville, as elsewhere, quickly expanded beyond the railroads and their workers.⁸⁴ On Wednesday, Louisville was in the midst of what could only be called a general strike. Despite the presence of thousands of armed citizen-soldiers, the workers at the metal shops and foundries downtown struck for higher wages. The *Courier Journal* also reported strikes at the Kentucky lead and oil works, all the downtown furniture factories, woolen mills, horse collar makers, and tobacco factories, as well as by many of the city's coopers, brickmakers, and African American levee workers. Many of the demands of these workers, which tended to focus on wages and hours, were met and they returned to work quickly. Some, however, were not. The foundry workers, for example, were still holding out for higher wages at the end of the month.⁸⁵

In part because of its sensationalism, and in part because of its proximity, the violence in Louisville attracted a great deal of attention in Nashville and added to an already growing sense of unease in that city. The *Nashville Daily American* reported extensively on the strikes in Louisville, indicating that there were more than a thousand strikers in the city on Wednesday, including "many car drivers, coopers, moulders and all classes of workmen." The editors noted that these strikers "were not in Tuesday's rabble, but quit work this morning and asked for higher wages." In addition, the *Daily American* noted that despite the presence of more than 1,600 armed guards and police, a mob burned down a contractor's stable.⁸⁶

The effect on Nashville of the events in Louisville was immediate. Rumors spread "that a crowd of roughs had taken a 'wild train' at Louisville and was coming to Nashville to 'take the town'."⁸⁷ It would turn out that trouble had indeed ridden the rails into Nashville, but it would not take the form of a train full of toughs invading the town. Nashville workers had grievances of their own, and would not be slow in using the disturbances in Louisville and elsewhere to press their case. Rumors began to circulate that workers on the Nashville, Chattanooga & St. Louis Railroad had called upon J. W. Thomas, the general superintendent, to make some sort of demands, but "he said that only a few men had called, but with no definite purpose in view."⁸⁸ Knowing the workers on his line had already endured a pay cut back in June, and not wanting to take any chances, the court-appointed receiver for the St. Louis & Southeastern Railway Jas. H. Wilson, issued a warning to all Nashville

residents: "All persons take notice that the property of the St. Louis and Southeastern railway is in the custody of the United States Courts, and injury to it or its employes is injury to the Federal Government."⁸⁹ Amid the worry and concern, the *Daily American* continued to dismiss fears of a strike on the Southeastern even though a mob in Evansville, Indiana, had prevented the company from sending anything more than a mail car down the line to Nashville. The paper noted that "the Southeastern pay car arrived yesterday on its regular tour, which doubtless had the effect to put the men employed by that road in a good humor"⁹⁰ But when everyone around them was using the strike to win back their lost wages, payday at their reduced wages would not keep the Southeastern workers in good humor for long.

By noon on Thursday the twenty-sixth, the Great Strike had arrived in Nashville. That morning, workers on the Southeastern telegraphed a petition to the general manager, Gen. J. H. Wilson, in St. Louis indicating that because "the Louisville & Great Southern railroad has restored the wages paid their employes before June 1, we, the engineers and firemen of this company, think that it is nothing but right that a like courtesy should be extended to us." In addition to the restoration of their wages, the workers requested the abolition of a classification scheme that had been enacted at the time of the wage cuts whereby engineers were paid different rates based upon their length of service and type of equipment they operated. When receiver Wilson replied that "this railway is in the custody of the United States Court, and that I, in the capacity of receiver, am an agent of that tribunal — the matter rests with the judges and I decline to take any action," the workers decided to go out on strike. As the *Daily American* noted, "the men claim that if General Wilson had the power to reduce their salaries they could not see why he could not increase them as well"⁹¹ The mere threat of a strike had already won back the wages for the men on the Louisville & Cincinnati Short Line, as well as the Louisville & Nashville & Great Southern, and reports from Memphis indicated that on the night before, the men of the Memphis & Charleston had asked for a restoration of their wages, a request that was granted on the twenty-sixth.⁹² Under cover of the turmoil of the Great Strike nationally, and of the violence closer to home in Louisville, the men of the Southeastern struck to achieve what they saw others around them receiving.

Telegraphing his responses from St. Louis, a city gripped by its own set of problems in relation to the Great Strike, Wilson, the receiver for the Southeastern, refused to act to increase the strikers' wages.⁹³ In support of Wilson, on Friday the twenty-seventh, the U.S. District Court judge for the Middle District of Tennessee, Connelly F. Trigg, issued an order to the U.S. marshall in Nashville E. S. Wheat, to take immediate action to protect the property of

the Southeastern, and if necessary, to "take possession of the road and rolling stock and hold the same subject to the order and control of the court"⁸⁸ Isolated and alone, the only railroad workers in the city who had not had their wages restored, the men of the Southeastern were in for a hard time.

Marshall Wheat acted quickly to limit the effect of the strike. Operating on the basis of Judge Trigg's order, Wheat decided not to summon a posse but instead "went in person and passed the trains through and beyond the assemblages of strikers, endeavoring by gentle means and good council to persuade the men to desist."⁸⁹ Boarding the mail train and riding it into the yards at Edgefield on the outskirts of Nashville, Wheat convinced the men to let the train pass unmolested. He told them if they uncoupled the mail car he would just recouple it, and if they then uncoupled it again, he would arrest them. He then began taking their names down, and the men decided to let the train pass.⁹⁰ When the men argued with him, and with local agent R. G. Butler, they insisted the strike was "the only redress they had," and that "they would like to see the matter settled as early as possible." They also reiterated their claim that "Gen. Wilson had it in his power to restore their wages, if, by the exercise of such power, he could reduce them." The *Daily American* reported further that "many of the employes express a good deal of bitterness toward Gen. Wilson, who, they say, is rather abrupt and arbitrary in his manner of treating them"⁹¹ Despite these claims Butler continued to try to convince the men they would be better off if they would just go back to work, suggesting that if Judge Trigg in fact ordered Wheat to take over the line, they would all lose their jobs.⁹² But the strikers knew that railroad workers and others in Memphis, Louisville, and Nashville had already successfully used the turmoil of the Great Strike to advance their causes, and they hoped to be able to do the same.

On Saturday morning crowds gathered at the Southeastern depot, anxious to see if the trains would run or not. As Nashvillians wondered what would happen, the strikers themselves seemed unsure of what to do. The *Daily American* reported that "the Southeastern employes were having frequent consultations in squads, and then as a whole. While some were opposed to allowing the coaches to go out, they finally yielded to the will of the majority, though all seemed in doubt as to the best course to be pursued."⁹³ The men of the Southeastern knew what they wanted, but they were not as sure about how to get it.

Although the men rejected Wilson's claim that he had no authority to raise their wages, the strikers decided to petition Judge Trigg directly. Meeting on Sunday morning, the twenty-ninth, the strikers set forth their grievances, which they delivered to the judge on Monday. Several specific issues were

addressed in addition to the reduction in pay, including the dismissal of an engineer and a conductor as well as the classification scheme the company had enacted. In their petition, the railroad workers specifically mentioned that not only was their pay inadequate, but that it was lower than any other road running into Nashville, and that all the other companies had "satisfactorily settled the difficulties between themselves and employes."¹⁰¹

Any hopes the strikers had that the judge would intervene on their behalf were crushed when the judge responded to their petition by sending instructions to Marshall Wheat "to summon a sufficient posse to protect the management in the running of the trains; and, if he could not get a posse in the Middle district of Tennessee sufficiently large to carry out this purpose, he should not hesitate to call for United States soldiers."¹⁰² Based on the judge's new order issued July 30, Wheat "summoned a posse of men and took possession" of the railroad on July 31. Approximately three hundred people turned out to the depot hoping to be called, but, in all, only twenty-eight men served with Wheat, earning \$3 per day and \$3 per night of active duty; a number of men earned as much as \$15 over the course of the four days Wheat controlled the railroad.¹⁰³ This compares to the reduced rate of \$3.75 and \$3.50 per day paid to engineers or the rate of firemen, who were paid half that of engineers, or the less than \$1.00 per day paid to laborers.¹⁰⁴ Wheat noted to the judge in his report that "many of the guards . . . [were] married men and need the pay for their services," making arrangements to secure their pay within the week.¹⁰⁴

Although the strikers did not resort to violence, at least not such that was reported by Marshal Wheat or recorded in the newspaper, they did continue to press their demands and did what they could to keep the trains from running.¹⁰⁵ When six engineers were brought in from Evansville, Indiana, on Tuesday night, the strikers boarded the train they were on and convinced three of them to leave town. When Marshall Wheat discovered that three of his six engineers had "been 'snaked' away," he forbade the strikers from talking to the other three upon penalty of arrest.¹⁰⁶ The strikers, though promised to use neither threats of violence nor intimidation, but only wanted to talk to the men. They promised Wheat that if any engineer could be found that would take a train out of Nashville, they would let him do so unmolested. They did, apparently, place two iron rails on top of the rails some distance out of town, which a southbound passenger train ran into, but no damage was done. By Tuesday, the strikers had also reduced their demands, promising they would return to work if the company abolished the classification scheme for newly hired engineers and if it would restore the wages of the lowest paid laborers on the force to \$1.00 and \$1.25 per day, as it was before

the reduction in June. Neither receiver Wilson nor Judge Trigg replied to their new offer.¹⁰⁷

By Wednesday morning the strike on the Southeastern road was effectively broken when a freight train, complete with guards "armed with breech loading rifles furnished . . . by his Excellency Governor Porter," pulled out of Nashville at 5:40 A.M.¹⁰⁸ On Thursday, the *Daily American* indicated that the strikers were willing to go back to work and expected that "the management will retain all but about six, who have been more prominent in the strike."¹⁰⁹ Reporting the next day, however, the paper noted that only "three or four engineers and firemen, out of the strikers, resumed their places. Some of the strikers said they did not propose to return to their labors on that line, while others would not have been permitted by the management to do so."¹¹⁰ At 10:00 Thursday morning, August 2, exactly one week after it began, the only actual strike by railroad workers in Tennessee during the Great Strike of 1877 came to a dismal end. Marshall Wheat, after taking possession of the railroad and guarding it for four days, turned the railroad and its property back over to Wilson, the receiver, "in the same condition as when taken into my [Wheat's] control, so far as I have been able to learn."¹¹¹

The larger effects of the strike, however, and the inspiration to working people in the Mid-South that it represented, did not come to an end. As it turned out, Louisville was not the only city in the region to experience strikes by workers outside the railroad industry during the Great Strike. Memphis, too, had problems with other workers seeking to take advantage of the general turmoil associated with the strike. On Wednesday, August 1, the brickmakers of the city went out on strike, asking for an additional twenty five cents a day in wages, and were refused. The street force working for the gas company also demanded an increase in wages, and they were all fired.¹¹² The day before, just up the Mississippi River in Cairo, Illinois, a city technically in a northern state but southern in temperament and custom, African American laborers on the wharves of the Mississippi and Ohio rivers struck for an increase in wages from twenty to thirty cents an hour—a demand that was quickly granted.¹¹³ Earlier in the strike, on Friday, July 27, African American longshoremen in New Orleans successfully went on strike, demanding a raise from thirty cents an hour to forty, the wage being paid to white laborers on other wharves.¹¹⁴ The New Orleans strikers, perhaps because of the memory of that city's failed dock worker strikes of 1872 and 1875, attracted particular attention in Louisville, where the *Courier Journal* noted that "a tendency to trouble with workingmen in New Orleans has been met by placing the city military on a war footing, with orders to use no blank cartridges in the event of a mob demonstration."¹¹⁵ As far away as Galveston, Texas, black workers,

ranging from railroad workers to day laborers to laundry women, struck over wage rates and working conditions.¹⁶ During the course of the Great Strike, workers all over the region tried to take advantage of the opportunity for advancing their own interests, some more successfully than others.

Although it appeared that the strike, at least insofar as it threatened the Mid-South, was over, on Saturday, August 4, African American workers in Memphis employed on the wharves and elsewhere in the city reportedly planned to engage in a general strike. According to the *Appeal*, "several hundred colored laborers, instigated by evil minded white and black men, have been holding meetings and agitating this movement for several days past"¹⁷ At a meeting Friday night, August 3, a number of Memphis's African American workers resolved to strike for higher wages. The newspaper reported that the strikers planned "to visit the elevator of the Memphis and St. Louis packet company, at the foot of Beale street, and on the arrival of the down river boat they would board her and compel the crew to quit work and strike for higher wages, and prevent anybody from going to work on board until the company's agents agreed to advance their wages." Earlier in the day, African Americans employed in various jobs throughout the city had, upon being paid, "informed their employers that they were not going to work again until their wages were raised." The majority of these workers were reportedly fired, but the action, the *Appeal* argued, clearly indicated "that an organized scheme had been concocted." And it was also clear that it was not the kind of action that would be tolerated by the white citizens of Memphis.¹¹⁸

In contrast to their earlier stance evincing sympathy for the plight of the railroad strikers in the North, the *Daily Appeal* was adamantly opposed to action of any kind on the part of the city's African American workers. The paper published an editorial notice "to the negro laborers who last night threatened the city with riot, we desire to say that the civil authorities of Memphis are prepared to and will maintain the peace at any and every hazard."¹⁹ And they were right. In addition to the city police, the Chickasaw Guards, the Bluff City Grays, and Captain Reudelbuber's artillery company were all called out under arms to prevent any type of organized strike by the city's African American workers. A request to the governor for additional arms was granted on the fourth, but "due to the small number of arms in the State Arsenal," a mere two hundred rifles were shipped to bolster local forces.²⁰ Explaining that "should the black man come in collision with the white man, the former goes to the wall," the *Daily Appeal* boasted somewhat gleefully that "should the rioters attempt an outbreak, it will be no child's play on the part of the military, and but few blank cartridges will be used."

The threatened riot never materialized. The *Appeal* noted that "acting upon the sober second thought, the colored men who on Saturday threatened the city with riot and bloodshed have resolved to seek peaceable means of redress." The *Appeal* continued, writing that "this is as it should be. If the packet companies and steamboats will not pay as much as they think they deserve for a day's labor, they have only to go out a few miles into the country to find plenty of work at good wages, with comfortable quarters and abundance of seasonable food." The South clearly had a place for African American workers, and that place was not in a labor action. "To the country, then, we would advise the discontented negro laborers to go. . . . The planters will reward their labor bountifully, and insure them against a possible visit from the traditional wolf who is always yelping at the poor man's door."¹²² The South, the *Appeal* argued, knew the appropriate way to deal with its black citizens, and it did not appreciate the interference of northerners in its affairs. If the Great Strike proved anything, it proved to southerners that northerners should tend to their own problems, as they obviously had many. Uniformly making this point, the southern press editorialized on the general absence of violence in the South during the Great Strike, glossing over the labor actions that did arise.¹²³

Both during and after the strike, many publishers minimized or ignored the participation of southern workers in the national uprising. In Allan Pinkerton's 1878 account of the strike, he characterized the riot as "bristling with piquant incidents to be laughed over in future years, that every Louisvillian can be very much obliged to them for an agreeable diversion from every day business routine."¹²⁴ Two other accounts published in 1878, J. A. Dacus's *Annals of the Great Strikes* and Edward Winslow Martin's *The History of the Great Riots*, also downplayed the effect of the strike in the South, either barely mentioning or ignoring completely the disturbances in Louisville and Nashville.¹²⁵ Dacus mostly used the events in Louisville to highlight what he imaginatively termed the "complete restoration of good feeling between the North and South," noting that "hundreds of ex-soldiers of the blue and grey stood shoulder to shoulder in the ranks."¹²⁶ The uniform message seemed to proclaim that there was little real trouble in the South, as compared to the North, and what little occurred was easily resolved. Dacus praised both workers and management in Memphis for being able to "amicably" adjust their differences. The workers, according to Dacus (and the Memphis newspaper), "respectfully couched" their demands and expressed that they "appreciated the difficulties under which the management labored." The response by management was positive, leading Dacus to proclaim that it "justly" entitles them to the lasting gratitude of the people of the entire

country . . . [having] perhaps even saved the country from a revolution."¹²⁷ Although events in the North seemed to bring out the worst in people, these writers followed the lead of the southern press in highlighting the relatively positive nature of the events surrounding the strike in the South.

Although the southern press tried to minimize discussion about the participation of southern workers in the strike, the latent potential for labor violence revealed by the events of July clearly worried people. Like the iron fist covered by a white glove of humor, Pinkerton noted in his account of the Louisville events that, although the riots gave "a vast amount of amusement to the citizens of the city," the rapid military response should "remain as a perpetual warning to the turbulent and lawless elements of Louisville."¹²⁸ Basil Duke, basking in the success of his citizen army's restoration of peace to the beleaguered city, wrote the governor to say that hundreds of citizens wanted to establish military organizations armed by the state but independent of the state guard and under the authority of the mayor. The governor refused, telling Duke instead that "the citizens of Louisville should immediately organize a sufficient number of State Guard companies to form a Battalion or Regiment and I will arm them and use all my power to make the organization effective and an honor as well as a safeguard to Louisville." Governor McCreary tried to explain that although Duke's fears of further turmoil might not be unreasonable, Duke was not the only one making such a request. "In every section of the state," McCreary wrote, "I have refused applications to furnish arms to independent military companies" because the law restricted the disbursement of public arms to state militia only.¹²⁹ Fear of further violence was widespread, if quietly expressed.

In Tennessee, private business owners, fearful of the potential for labor violence, petitioned the governor for troops and arms to protect their establishments. Responding to a letter from Germantown dated August 8, Governor Porter explained that in the absence of a declaration of emergency by the state legislature, it was the duty of county sheriffs to maintain order, not the state militia, and further that "I have no arms that I can furnish you for your Company. All those on hand are already disposed of or engaged."¹³⁰ In a personal discussion at the capitol, however, Governor Porter apparently promised to provide the Knoxville Iron Company "with an order with which we could obtain some muskets for the use of guards to protect our buildings, tracks and improvements at our mines."¹³¹ W. R. Tuttle, president of the Knoxville Iron Company, planned to introduce convict labor to work the mines. An agent of the East Tennessee, Virginia & Georgia Railroad Company, also based in Knoxville, wrote the governor, explaining that "Companies are being organized and being drilled . . . with the avowed purpose of resisting

the introduction of Convict labor in the mines. That not only the miners but citizens are taking an active part in the matter. They threaten not only to drive off the Convicts—but to burn all the bridges on my Road." On behalf of the railroad, the letter writer continued, saying that "my object in writing at this time [July 27] is to acquire, in view of this state of affairs—and of the general disturbed condition of things throughout the country—all of which—you are well aware—what further demonstration you would want to justify you in affording as a strong guard to make these parties to place convicts in these mines—and to protect our Railroad property."³² In a follow up letter to the governor's promise of arms, on August 6 Tuttle told Porter that "[t]en years experience with these same miners convinces me that temporizing and argument with them is a waste of time. . . . They are chiefly Welsh and to use the sayings of one of their own people, 'They are as treacherous as the devil.' They will say one thing and do another" Tuttle concluded by saying "that they are in earnest in their threats there is no room for doubt. Hence I say to you in all caution that the sooner the question is settled the less time they and their supporters will have to perfect their schemes of resistance and to work up sympathy and public opinion."³³ The events of July proved that, even in the Mid-South, workers could and would engage in strikes and violence when they believed conditions gave them no alternative.

Although there continued to be pockets of concern over persistent labor violence in August 1877, what the purveyors of public opinion in the Mid-South wanted most was to return to doing business in the traditional way. On August 2, in the midst of some lingering local strikes but after the southern railroads were clearly running again and the worst of the danger from the strikes had passed, the *Appeal* ran an advertisement under the heading, "Workingmen's Demonstration." Leading off with the statement that "about eight o'clock yesterday evening a large crowd of workingmen assembled on Main street," the column continued with descriptions of the workers' "constantly swelling numbers" and of their walking "steadily and quietly" toward a clear objective. "At a point between Adams and Jefferson," the paper continued, "The workingmen halted, and quickly took possession of the Great Western clothing house. The genial proprietor of that far famed establishment well known to the workingmen as their best friend, gave them a cordial welcome, and then the 'strike' began. It is needless to say that the workingmen struck solid bargains in clothing and furnishing goods, and so ended the workingmen's strike in Memphis, to be reopened every Saturday night at the Great Western clothing-house, No. 227 Main street."³⁴ In Memphis, in the span of two weeks the Great Strike of 1877 had passed from a symbol of what was wrong with northern urban society to a threat of mischief

and mayhem in the streets, to a marketing ploy to attract business for a dry goods store.

In some ways, perhaps, the Great Strike did not shake the foundations of society in the Mid South as thoroughly as it did in other regions of the country. But it would be a mistake to suggest that it passed with no effect at all. Although Memphis's, Nashville's, and to some extent Louisville's experience with the Great Strike of 1877 did not mirror the experience of cities in the industrial Northeast and Midwest, it seems clear that the working people of the Mid South were not the contented, happy workers the newspapers sought to portray. Even though the single railroad strike actually to occur in Tennessee failed to achieve its aims, and the South by and large remained unfriendly toward unions and strikes, many workers — not just those in the railroad industry — in Memphis, Nashville, Louisville, and elsewhere in the region pushed for, and in many cases received, real concessions from their employers, resulting in both higher wages and improved working conditions. The national crisis precipitated by the Great Strike created an opportunity for change, and the working people of the Mid South, black and white alike, did what they could to make the most of it.

Notes

1 Although regional definitions vary, the Mid-South almost always includes Tennessee and Kentucky. Sometimes Alabama and Mississippi are also included, as are Louisiana, Arkansas, Missouri, Oklahoma, and Texas, depending on the organization doing the defining.

2 C. Vann Woodward, *Reunion and Reaction: The Compromise of 1877 and the End of Reconstruction* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1951, 1966) presents the standard history of this series of events, an interpretation adopted by many writers on the South. For a more nuanced view of the end of Reconstruction as a result of conflicting ideologies revolving around notions of free labor versus class struggle, see Heather Cox Richardson, *The Death of Reconstruction: Race, Labor, and Politics in the Post-Civil War North, 1865–1901* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001). See also Nancy Cohen, *The Reconstruction of American Liberalism, 1865–1914* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), esp. 61–85, for a discussion of how the labor question affected the South.

3 Newspapers were an important component of the public dialogue during the second half of the nineteenth century, providing their readers with both news and an interpretation of events. Although the general press tended to write about similar topics in all parts of the country, mainstream newspapers tended to interpret events from a sectional or party perspective, thereby shaping the public's perception as well as providing information. The South, particularly the lot of the freedmen and their treatment by southern whites, was a frequent topic of the national press, and one that did not show the region or its white inhabitants in a particularly good light. Given the nature of the events of July

1877 southern papers, including the papers of the Mid South, were only too happy to reciprocate; Richardson, *Death of Reconstruction*, xii.

4 For a good discussion of the historiography of the Great Strike, see David O. Stowell *Streets, Railroads and the Great Strike of 1877* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 1–11. See also Philip S. Foner, *The Great Labor Uprising of 1877* (New York: Monad Press, 1977); Robert V. Bruce, *1877: Year of Violence* (Chicago: Elephant Paperbacks, 1989 [1959]); Jeremy Brecher, *Strike!* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1972); David T. Burbank, *Reign of the Rabble: The St. Louis General Strike of 1877* (New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1966); David R. Roediger, “Not Only the Ruling Classes to Overcome, but Also the So-Called Mob! Class, Skill and Community in the St. Louis General Strike of 1877,” *Journal of Social History* (winter 1985), 213–39; Nick Salvatore, “Railroad Workers and the Great Strike of 1877: The View from a Small Midwest City,” *Labor History* 21, no. 4 (fall 1980): 522–45; J. A. Dacas, *Annals of the Great Strikes in the United States* (Chicago: J. T. Palmer and Co., 1877; repr. New York: Arno Press, 1969); Allan Pinkerton, *Strikers, Communists, Tramps, and Detectives* (New York: G. W. Carleton and Co., 1878; repr. New York: Arno Press, 1969).

5 Eric Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans: Race, Class and Politics, 1863–1923* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Peter Rachleff, *Black Labor in the South: Richmond, Virginia, 1865–1890* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984); Donald G. Nieman, ed., *African Americans and Non-Agricultural Labor in the South, 1865–1900* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994). Worker organization to achieve better pay was not restricted to urban workers, but can also be seen in the countryside. See esp. Julie Saville, *The Work of Reconstruction: From Slave to Wage Laborer in South Carolina, 1860–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); John C. Rodrigue, *Reconstruction in the Cane Fields: From Slavery to Free Labor in Louisiana’s Sugar Parishes, 1862–1880* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001).

6 Steven J. Hoffman, *Race, Class, and Power in the Building of Richmond, 1870–1920* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland and Co., 2004).

7 George C. Wright, *Life behind a Veil: Blacks in Louisville, Kentucky, 1865–1930* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 7, and Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans*, 52.

8. *Memphis Daily Appeal*, July 19, 1877, 1.

9. *Memphis Daily Appeal*, July 20, 1877, 1.

10 Jonathan Kennon Thompson Smith, “Genealogical Tidbits from the *Memphis Daily Appeal* during the Centennial Year of 1876,” <http://www.tngenweb.org/madison-smith/mda/76-03.htm> (accessed December 6, 2003).

11. *Memphis Daily Appeal*, July 21, 1877, 1.

12 See Joshua Brown’s chapter in this volume for a fuller discussion of the ways in which newspapers, through the use of visual imagery, altered perceptions of workers in the public’s imagination.

13 *Memphis Daily Appeal*, July 20, 1877, 1.

14. *Memphis Daily Appeal*, July 24, 1877, 1.

15 *Memphis Daily Appeal*, July 24, 1877, 2.

16. Foner, *The Great Labor Uprising of 1877*; Bruce, *1877: Year of Violence*.

17. *Memphis Daily Appeal*, July 24, 1877, 2.

- 18 Ibid.
19. *Nashville Daily American*, July 20, 1877, 2
20. *Nashville Daily American*, July 24, 1877, 2.
- 21 Woodward *Reaction and Reunion* Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life after Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press 1992), 332–33 and 340–41
C. Vann Woodward *Origins of the New South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press; rev. ed., June 1971)
22. Although not widespread public knowledge, many of these issues had been worked out by the various factions of the national political parties in the so-called Compromise of 1877. Woodward, *Reunion and Reaction*.
- 23 *Nashville Daily American*, July 25, 1877, 2, Woodward, *Reunion and Reaction* 245–46
- 24 *Louisville Courier-Journal*, July 23, 1877, 2
25. *Louisville Courier-Journal*, July 26, 1877, 1.
26. *Memphis Daily Appeal*, July 24, 1877, 1.
27. Ibid.
- 28 *Memphis Daily Appeal*, July 26, 1877, 3.
- 29 *Memphis Daily Appeal*, July 24, 1877, 1.
30. Ibid.
- 31 *Memphis Daily Appeal*, July 25, 1877, 1.
- 32 Ibid
33. Richardson, *Death of Reconstruction*, xii.
34. *Memphis Daily Appeal*, July 24, 1877, 1.
- 35 Ibid.
36. *Memphis Daily Appeal*, July 24, 25, 1877, 1.
37. *Memphis Daily Appeal*, July 25, 1877, 1.
38. *Memphis Daily Appeal*, July 26, 1877, 3.
- 39 Letter, Robert Duncan to Governor James D. Porter, July 27, 1877, Governor James D. Porter Papers, 1875–1879, GP 24, Reel 2, Box 3 Folder 8, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, Tennessee.
- 40 *Memphis Daily Appeal*, July 26, 1877, 1, editorial.
- 41 Woodward *Reunion and Reaction* *Memphis Daily Appeal*, July 26, 1877, 1, editorial
42. *Memphis Daily Appeal*, July 26, 1877, 3.
43. *Memphis Daily Appeal*, July 27, 1877, 4
- 44 Dacus, *Annals of the Great Smokes*, 468, *Memphis Daily Appeal*, July 27, 1877, 2, editorial.
45. *Memphis Daily Appeal*, July 28, 1877, 2.
46. *Memphis Daily Appeal*, July 31, 1877, 2, editorial.
47. *Nashville Daily American*, July 22, 1877, 4.
48. *Nashville Daily American*, July 24, 1877, 1.
49. *Nashville Daily American*, July 24, 1877, 4.
50. *Nashville Daily American*, July 25, 1877, 1.
51. *Nashville Daily American*, July 25, 1877, 4.
52. Ibid.

53. See esp. Stowell, *Streets, Railroads, and the Great Strike of 1877* for a discussion of the role of urban crowds in the larger disturbances associated with the strike.

54. *Nashville Daily American*, July 25, 1877, 4.

55. *Ibid.*

56. *Ibid.*

57. *Memphis Daily Appeal*, July 25, 1877, 1.

58. Bill L. Weaver, "Louisville's Labor Disturbance, July, 1877," *Filson Club Historical Quarterly* 48, no. 2 (April 1974): 177-86; Pinkerton, *Strikers, Communists, Tramps, and Detectives*, 384-87.

59. *Louisville Courier-Journal*, July 25, 1877, 4.

60. *Ibid.*

61. *Ibid.*

62. *Nashville Daily American*, July 25, 1877, 1.

63. *Nashville Daily American*, July 25, 1877, 4; *Louisville Courier-Journal*, July 25, 1877, 4.

64. *Nashville Daily American*, July 26, 1877, 1; *Memphis Daily Appeal*, July 26, 1877, 1.

65. *Louisville Courier-Journal*, July 25, 1877, 4; Pinkerton, *Strikers, Communists, Tramps, and Detectives*, 385.

66. *Nashville Daily American*, July 25, 1877, 1.

67. *Louisville Courier-Journal*, July 25, 1877, 1.

68. *Louisville Courier-Journal*, July 25, 1877, 4.

69. *Ibid.*

70. "Proclamation," Broadside, July 25, 1877, Jacob, Charles Donald, 1838-1918 Papers, MSS C J, Filson Historical Society, Louisville, Kentucky.

71. *Louisville Courier-Journal*, July 25, 1877, 1.

72. *Nashville Daily American*, July 26, 1877, 1; *Memphis Daily Appeal*, July 26, 1877, 1.

73. "Report to Mayor Jacob from Basil W. Duke, Commander-in-Chief of the City Forces," July 31, 1877, Louisville City Records, Metro Archives, Louisville, Kentucky; August 2, 1877, *Minutes of the Common Council*, 14 Dec. 1877-12 Dec. 1878 (2nd Part), Reel #35, Louisville City Records microfilm, the University of Louisville Archives and Records Center, Louisville, Kentucky; August 2, 1877, *Minutes of the Board of Aldermen*, 1876, December 14-1878, December 12: reel 17, Legislative Records of Louisville, Kentucky, Bound Volumes, 1781-1929, microfilm, The University of Louisville Archives and Records Center, Louisville, Kentucky; Letter to John Baxter, March 24, 1870, Basil Wilson Duke Papers, 1838-1916, MSS 8, Filson Historical Society, Louisville, Kentucky.

74. "Report to Mayor Jacob from Basil W. Duke, Commander-in-Chief of the City Forces," July 31, 1877. According to the governor, more than half the arms available in the state were shipped to Louisville from the state arsenal in Frankfort. Letter from Gov. James B. McCreary to Gen. Basil Duke, 9 August 1877, McCreary, James Bennett, 1838-1918 Papers, MSS C, M, Filson Historical Society, Louisville, Kentucky.

75. *Louisville Courier-Journal*, July 25, 1877, 1; "Report to Mayor Jacob from Basil W. Duke, Commander-in-Chief of the City Forces," July 31, 1877.

76. "Proclamation by the Mayor," Broadside, July 25, 1877, Jacob, Charles Donald, 1838-1918 Papers, MSS C J, Filson Historical Society, Louisville, Kentucky; *Louisville Courier-Journal*, July 25, 1877, 1.

77. "Report to Mayor Jacob from Basil W. Duke, Commander-in-Chief of the City Forces," July 31, 1877.

78. *Louisville Courier-Journal*, July 26, 1877, 1.

79. Letter, Joshua F. Speed to Norvin Green, 27 July 1877, Green, Norvin, 1818-1893 Papers, MSS A, G 797, 21, Filson Historical Society, Louisville, Kentucky. Norvin Green was vice president of Western Union, a corporation he assumed the presidency of in 1878.

80. Maury Klein, *History of the Louisville & Nashville Railroad* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1972), 147.

81. *Nashville Daily American*, July 26, 1877, 1; *Memphis Daily Appeal*, July 26, 1877, 1.

82. *Annual Report of the Louisville & Nashville Railroad Company, 1877-78* (Louisville, Ky.: Bradley and Gilbert, 1878), 9.

83. "Report to Mayor Jacob from Basil W. Duke, Commander-in-Chief of the City Forces," July 31, 1877; and *Annual Report of the Louisville & Nashville Railroad Company, 1877-78*, 9.

84. Stowell, *Streets, Railroads, and the Great Strike of 1877*; Burbank, *Reign of the Rabble*; Roediger, "Not Only the Ruling Classes to Overcome, but Also the So-Called Mob."

85. *Louisville Courier-Journal*, July 27, 1877, 4, July 28, 1877, 4, July 29, 1877, 4, July 31, 1877, 4.

86. *Nashville Daily American*, July 26, 1877, 1.

87. *Nashville Daily American*, July 26, 1877, 4.

88. Ibid.

89. Ibid.

90. Ibid.

91. *Nashville Daily American*, July 27, 1877, 4.

92. *Nashville Daily American*, July 27, 1877, 1.

93. Burbank, *Reign of the Rabble*; Roediger, "Not Only the Ruling Classes to Overcome, but Also the So-Called Mob."

94. *Nashville Daily American*, July 28, 1877, 4.

95. "Report of Edward Wheat, U.S. Marshall, to Hon. Connally Trigg, Judge," Record Group 21, Records of the U.S. Circuit Courts, Middle District of Tennessee, Nashville Division, Equity Case 2184, in the holdings of the National Archives, Southeast Region, Atlanta, Georgia.

96. *Nashville Daily American*, July 28, 1877, 4.

97. Ibid.

98. Ibid.

99. *Nashville Daily American*, July 29, 1877, 4.

100. *Nashville Daily American*, July 31, 1877, 4.

101. Ibid.

102. *Nashville Daily American*, August 2, 1877, 4; "Report of Edward Wheat, U.S. Marshall, to Hon. Connally Trigg, Judge."

103. *Nashville Daily American*, July 28, 1877, 4; July 29, 1877, 4; August 1, 1877, 4.

104. "Report of Edward Wheat, U.S. Marshall, to Hon. Connally Trigg, Judge."

105. Ibid.

106. *Nashville Daily American*, August 1, 1877, 4.

107. Ibid.
108. "Report of Edward Wheat, U.S. Marshall, to Hon. Connally Trigg, Judge"; *Nashville Daily American*, August 2, 1877, 4.
109. *Nashville Daily American*, August 2, 1877, 4.
110. *Nashville Daily American*, August 3, 1877, 4.
111. "Report of Edward Wheat, U.S. Marshall, to Hon. Connally Trigg, Judge."
112. *Nashville Daily American*, August 2, 1877, 1.
113. *Memphis Daily Appeal*, August 1, 1877, 1; *Nashville Daily American*, August 1, 1877, 1.
114. *Nashville Daily American*, July 28, 1877, 2.
115. Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans*, 44-60; *Louisville Courier-Journal*, July 30, 1877, 1.
116. Philip S. Foner and Ronald L. Lewis, *The Black Worker during the Era of the National Labor Union* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978), 162-67; Jeremy Brecher, *Strike!* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1972), 17.
117. *Memphis Daily Appeal*, August 5, 1877, 2.
118. Ibid.
119. *Memphis Daily Appeal*, August 5, 1877, 1.
120. Letter to G. W. Cooper, Memphis Tennessee, August 4, 1877, Governor James D. Porter Papers, 1875-1879, GP 24, Reel 5, Box 9, Folder 1, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, Tennessee.
121. *Memphis Daily Appeal*, August 5, 1877, 2. For information on the violent actions of Memphis whites involved in conflict in the streets with African Americans, see also James Gilbert Ryan, "The Memphis Riots of 1866: Terror in a Black Community during Reconstruction," *Journal of Negro History* (July 1977): 243-57; Altina Waller, "Community, Class and Race in the Memphis Riot of 1866," *Journal of Social History* 18, no. 2 (1984): 233-46; *Memphis Riots and Massacres*, reprint of *The Reports of the Committees of the House of Representatives, Made During the First Session Thirty-Ninth Congress, 1865-66* (New York: Arno Press, 1969).
122. *Memphis Daily Appeal*, August 7, 1877, 2, editorial.
123. Both the *Appeal* and the *Daily American* reprinted editorials from leading southern papers. See also Dacus, *Annals of the Great Strikes*, 428.
124. Pinkerton, *Strikers, Communists, Tramps, and Detectives*, 385-87.
125. Dacus, *Annals of the Great Strikes*; James Dabney McCabe, *The History of the Great Riots; The Strikes and Riots on the Various Railroads of the United States and in the Mining Regions, Together with a Full History of the Mollie Maguires* by Edward Winslow Martin [pseud.] (Philadelphia: National Pub. Co., 1877; New York: A. M. Kelley, 1971); Weaver, "Louisville's Labor Disturbance, July, 1877," 185.
126. Dacus, *Annals of the Great Strikes*, 430.
127. *Memphis Daily Appeal*, July 26, 1877, 3; Dacus, *Annals of the Great Strikes*, 466-69.
128. Pinkerton, *Strikers, Communists, Tramps, and Detectives*, 387.
129. Letter from Governor James B. McCreary to Gen. Basil Duke, 9 August 1877, McCreary, James Bennett, 1838-1918 Papers, MSS C, M, Filson Historical Society, Louisville, Kentucky.

130. Letter to A. G. Harrison, undated response to letter dated 8 August 1877, Governor James D. Porter Papers, 1875–1879, GP 24, Reel 5, Box 9, Folder 1, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, Tennessee.

131. Letter from W. R. Tuttle, President Knoxville Iron Company, to Governor James D. Porter, August 6, 1877, Governor James D. Porter Papers, 1875–1879, GP 24, Reel 3, Box 5, Folder 3, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, Tennessee.

132. Letter from East Tennessee, Virginia & Georgia Railroad Company, to Governor James D. Porter, July 27, 1877, Governor James D. Porter Papers, 1875–1879, GP 24, Reel 2, Box 4, Folder 1, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, Tennessee.

133. Letter from W. R. Tuttle, President Knoxville Iron Company, to Governor James D. Porter, August 6, 1877, marked "private," Governor James D. Porter Papers, 1875–1879, GP 24, Reel 3, Box 5, Folder 3, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, Tennessee.

134. *Memphis Daily Appeal*, August 2, 1877, 4.